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Promises, promises

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SPECIAL INTEREST groups routinely ask candidates for public office to promise they would back the groups' pet projects and causes. But not many interest groups have the chutzpah to seek support from politicians for huge public expenditures and even tax increases to fund a specific future deal, *sight unseen*. That's precisely what the teachers union in Montgomery County has done in the past.

In 2006 the union, known as the [Montgomery County Education Association](#), included this question on its questionnaire for candidates seeking its endorsement for the Montgomery County Council: "Would you support a tax increase, if necessary, to fund the school budget and the negotiated agreements [setting salaries and benefits for teachers]? If so, in what way would you increase taxes?"

Keep in mind that these contracts put taxpayers on the hook far into the future for tens of millions of dollars. You'd think that a candidate might want to, say, review the impact of a contract covering 11,000 public employees and packing a massive budgetary punch before promising to raise taxes to pay for it. What's amazing is that most candidates gave a positive response.

Or maybe it's not so amazing. The teachers union wields such outsized influence in Montgomery County that it has been able to persuade candidates, once they receive the union's endorsement, to pony up thousands of dollars to finance the union's own mailings and campaigns on their behalf. That perverse practice is virtually unheard of elsewhere. It outsources campaigns to one powerful special interest group. Now, with election season approaching, candidates are again braced for a barrage of questionnaires -- from groups representing business, the environment, animals, firearms, abortion rights, developers, transit -- even, implausible as it may seem, good government. A number of groups, not just unions, solicit spending promises, sometimes hefty ones, for their priorities -- though generally (unlike with prospective contracts) the price tag is more or less known. In 2006, for instance, the Greater Washington Board of Trade asked candidates in Montgomery if they'd favor [construction of the Intercounty Connector](#), a new highway.

The teachers union says that this year's questionnaire will not seek specific promises to support tax increases to fund future contracts; instead, it will ask candidates broadly about their views on "honoring negotiated agreements" -- in the case of teachers, agreements negotiated by the school system. To its credit, the union says that it will post all completed questionnaires on [its Web site](#) this year; we hope that candidates and other interest groups follow suit. Those are modest steps in the right direction in Montgomery, which, having spent profligately in the past, is in a severe budgetary fix and risks losing

its AAA bond rating. Let's hope politicians are more prudent about their promises in this election cycle than they were in the last.